

Review of Europe in Autumn by David Hutchinson: Review by Allen Stroud

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Review: Europe in Autumn by Dave Hutchinson

The shortlist for the 2015 Clarke Awards showcased several dystopian genre-crossing stories. *Station Eleven* by Emily St John Mandel took most of the plaudits and the award, but sat alongside it was a this little gem of a story from David Hutchinson.

Europe in Autumn is described as a science fiction thriller. Those expecting either genre to assert itself from the opening may be disappointed, but the characteristics are laid out with calm confidence by Hutchinson, who clearly intends to tell the story he wants to tell irrespective of how many boxes it may tick.

Rudi the Estonian cook finds himself gradually taking on more and more little tasks for his employer, Max. To begin with, serving Hungarians in a Polish restaurant, but later he becomes involved in talk of politics amidst the fracturing European states and agrees to help Max's cousin cross a border, fleeing the Independent Silesian State of Hindenberg where he has become trapped. This leads him to becoming a member of *Les Coureur des Bois* – a secretive organisation that delivers messages and items all across the increasingly diverse continent.

Hutchinson's writing is immediately multi-cultural and urbane. There is a casual patience to the story that belies its science fiction trappings. Whilst the Europe of *Europe in Autumn* is a disintegrated checkerboard of new countries, Hutchinson doesn't convey this with some heavy expository paragraphs. Instead, through Rudi we explore the new paradigm and do so through the eyes of a man accustomed to his world and to travelling about it. This process never feels forced, but familiar, as if Hutchinson is drawing on detailed experience of journeying through these places. There is significant cultural contrast embedded into this near future so as to make it both connected and disturbed. This is a traveller's fiction, written for people experiencing the ritual of airplane travel, customs inspections and train journeys.

There isn't the sense of agency and agenda we have come to expect from characters in science fiction. The traditional quest plot would have worked with the premise of this story, but Hutchinson decides to provide something different. Rudi, our protagonist, has goals and objectives, but his struggle is as much to assert himself over events as it is against the gradual and fragmentation of society that we see all around him. In part, this causes us to question our present, looking for the seeds of this dissolution, as all good cautionary science fiction does. At its best, it also freshens the reading experience. New circumstances are introduced throughout the story, unbalancing the reader just as it unbalances the main character, but gradually he asserts himself and the answers arrive.

Europe in Autumn feels real in an understated way that exceeds some of its influences. There is a tangibility to this disturbed landscape and its layers of espionage that goes beyond our connection with Kafka, Deighton or Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Specifically, the dystopia is less tragic than others and more meaningful for it. Some social comment is indulged. The Scottish Referendum is played out to an alternate conclusion, but this isn't dwelt on and is a natural part of the wider tapestry of unravelling countries.

Similarly, Hutchinson's scenes take place in a vast array of locations, from the domestic to the cinematic. Science fiction doesn't often visit the laundrette, or the lodgings of hotel porters, but then spy thrillers don't race through invented countries and use inter-dimensional pathways to avoid

the border police. World changing revelations occur in rented hotel rooms and on cold snowy fields, not amidst romantic destruction, star field vistas, or broad utopian cityscapes.

Granted, some of the future technology Hutchinson employs could draw a comparison to the cinematic James Bond, but this wouldn't be fair to the way in which the devices are used. There isn't much of a sense of gadgetry, or children playing with toys. Devices are generally appropriate to need and innovation is carefully engineered. In some scenes, the technology is as much a mystery to Rudi as they are a marvel to us and his eventual understanding forms a key element to the discoveries of the story.

The final scenes do revert to some action clichés, but after such patient work in developing the elements of this, some re-woven shelf tropes can be forgiven. At this stage, Rudi has developed as a character enough to seize control of events, armed with the knowledge and items he has acquired along the way. The revelations of this conclusion though, are far from your usual fare as Hutchinson introduces another genre to confound your expectations.

Europe in Autumn is a confounding treasure, right from the title to the finish. Some readers have criticised the pace and lack of agency in the first half, others take against its fantastical mechanisms or its domesticity. Certainly, for those trapped in genre bound ghettos, this book is quiet subversion and an irritant. Yes, the pace is slow to start, much more accustomed to travel fiction, but this is deliberate, as Rudi struggles to take charge of events, making him different hero fare to what we have come to expect. Hutchinson clearly sees the codes and conventions of each as assets in his toolbox.

There is much mystery left to unravel at the book's conclusion and plenty of room for its sequel – *Europe at Midnight*. Hutchinson sets up the premise of this without distraction from tying up the plot threads he has already established and a well-drawn pause in a story is just as good as a happy ending.